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ABSTRACT

There are two types of literacy: mechanical literacy and critical literacy. Those who teach mechanical literacy use language to oppress, while those who teach critical literacy use language to liberate. The mechanical view of literacy oppresses because it encourages passivity and acceptance of authority, places a disproportionate emphasis on correctness at the expense of critical thinking, and restricts interpretation and sequential thought by requiring students to pattern compositions on preestablished rhetorical forms. In contrast, the critical view of literacy has the potential to liberate because it encourages students to become active learners through participation in the dialectical process, places primary emphasis on critical thinking, and promotes interpretation and sequential thought by teaching students the necessity of giving good reasons to create new knowledge and to develop critical perspectives. Composition instructors can use language to contribute to the intellectual liberation of their students by requiring them to read essays that deal with significant ideas and by encouraging them to make connections between those ideas through discussion, writing, and further reading. (Author/SRT)

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Teaching Freshman Composition:

The Language of Oppression vs. the Language of Liberation

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Abstract

This paper examines the distinction between two types of literacy, mechanical literacy and critical literacy, and argues that those who teach mechanical literacy use language to oppress and those who teach critical literacy use language to liberate. Mechanical literacy is based on four assumptions about language: (1) that knowledge exists prior to language, (2) that language is asocial, (3) that the primary purpose of language is to convey information, and (4) that learning to use language effectively is a matter of mastering certain mechanical skills. Critical literacy, on the other hand, is based on a set of opposing assumptions: (1) that knowledge is a function of language which provides the means by which we "compose" ourselves and create the "fictions" that inform reality, (2) that language is a social phenomenon not only connecting people to each other and to discourse communities, but also reflecting an implied hierarchy of social relationships, (3) that language, in addition to conveying information, creates new knowledge and provides the basis for judging and initiating action, and (4) that learning to use language effectively is a matter of engaging in dialectic activity in meaningful rhetorical contexts. The mechanical view of literacy oppresses because it encourages passivity and acceptance of authority, places a disproportionate empahsis on correctness at the expense of critical thinking, and restricts interpretation and sequential thought by requiring students to pattern compositions on pre-established rhetorical forms. In contrast, the critical view of literacy has the potential to liberate because it encourages students

to become active learners through participation in the dialectical process, places primary emphasis on critical thinking, and promotes interpretation and sequential thought by teaching students the necessity of giving good reasons to create new knowledge and to develop critical perspectives.

Teaching Freshman Composition:
The Language of Oppression vs. the Language of Liberation

This paper begins by examining the distinction between two types of literacy, mechanical literacy on the one hand and critical literacy on the other, and goes on to argue that those who teach mechanical literacy use language to oppress and those who teach critical literacy use language to liberate. Mechanical literacy is based on four assumptions about language: (1) that knowledge exists prior to language, (2) that language is asocial and neutral, (3) that the primary purpose of language is to convey information, and (4) that learning to use language effectively is a matter of mastering certain mechanical skills. Critical literacy, on the other hand, is based on a set of opposing assumptions: (1) that knowledge, rather than being prior to language, is a function of language which provides the means by which we "compose" ourselves and create the "fictions" that inform reality, (2) that language, instead of being asocial, is a social phenomenon not only connecting people to each other and to discourse communities, but also reflecting an implied hierarchy of social relationships, (3) that language, in addition to conveying information, creates new knowledge and provides the basis for judging and initiating action, and (4) that learning to use language effectively is not simply a matter of mastering a set of skills but of engaging in dialectical activity in meaningful rhetorical contexts.

First, mechanical literacy assumes that knowledge or meaning is prior to language. In large measure, this view of language is a result of the scientific revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth

centuries which, according to Jaki (1967), was made possible by "belief in the uniformity of nature and in the human mind's ability to find the true form of that uniformity" (p. 197). Meaning, in this view, resides in nature. It is perceived by the mind and recorded in language which accurately reflects the truth of observation. Thus, by the late nineteenth century, rhetoric, in the words of Berlin (1985), "had become the province of scientific discourse . . . . and all the ethical concerns of rhetoric were reduced to a question of transcribing accurately what empirical investigation revealed" (pp. 532-533). Assignments in freshman composition requiring students to describe their dorm room or an unforgetable person, to contrast a fast food restaurant to a gourmet restaurant, or to classify the kinds of sports at their college reflect the belief that a pre-existing order informs these "objects" and that the writer's task is to perceive the order and transcribe it. It is little wonder that Pattison (1982) refers to this phase of freshman writing as "the body of Bentham" (p. 197) or that Lanham (1986) compares the view of language taught in freshman composition to Euclidian geometry (p. 137).

Critical literacy, in contrast, assumes that knowledge is created by language. This is what Burke (1966) is getting at when he defines man as "the symbol-using animal," for he says that "however important to us is the tiny sliver of reality each of us has experienced firsthand, the whole overall 'picture' is but a construct of our symbol sysetms" (p. 5). Language, then, does not merely imitate reality but construes it. For example, Langer (1944) writes:

> There is no limit to the meanings he [man] can read into natural phenomena. As long as this power is undisciplined, the sheer enjoyment of finding meanings in everything, the elaboration of concepts without any regard to truth and usefulness, seems to run riot; superstition and ritual in their pristine strength go through what some anthropologists have called a "vegetative" state, when dreamlike symbols, gods and ghouls and rites, multiply like the overgrown masses of life in a jungle. From this welter of symbolic forms emerge the images that finally govern a civilization; the great symbols of religion, society, and selfhood. (p. 146)

Or to use Dillard's (1982) colorful image: "Our brains secrete bright ideas and forms of order; [like] armored scale insects secrete wax from their backs" (p. 182). Yet the process cuts both ways: just as the wax on the back of the insect offers it better protection, it may also interfere with the freedom of the insect's movement. The same is true of man's capacity to make symbols. While they bring order to chaos and produce the images which make civilization possible, they also have the potential to tyrannize either implicitly as Burke (1966) suggests with his concept of terministic screens (pp. 28, 44-62) or in more obvious ways through the symbols of power and status. The point is that mechanical literacy which does not recognize the constructive function of language and which views language much in the way Sprat did in The History of the Royal Society (1667) when he called for a "return back to the primitive purity, and shortness, when men deliver'd so many things, almost in an equal number of words" (p. 27), unwittingly

contributes to the power of language to tyrannize.

Mechanical literacy is based on a second assumption about language, that language is asocial because it is perceived as an independent and objective tool for description. From this perspective, the best writing or the best style is that which approaches a one to one relationship between words and things as Sprat suggests above. The hallmark of good style, then, is clarity. Consider this advice from a freshman composition text in which the authors, Winkler and McCuen (1981), make the following statement about clarity:

> The burden is on writers to express their ideas with clarity. Among students, wordiness is a prime cause of fuzzy writing. The cure for word clutter is pruning. So long as you have the facts on your side, you should not shrink from expressing your ideas directly, forcefully, and clearly. (p. 32)

In other words, as these authors recommend, students should get rid of excess language so that the facts can speak for themselves, for writing is mostly a matter of matching word to object. It is not surprising, therefore, that the focus of freshman composition courses is on style in all its manifestations--from concern with patterns of organization for the paragraph and the entire essay to advice about choosing the correct word.

Critical literacy, on the other hand, assumes that language is a social phenomenon. This is true because language is largely responsible for creating the self. As Booth (1974) points out, "What an adult man or woman is, in all societies, is in large degree what other men and

women have created through symbolic exchange. Each of us 'takes in' other selves to build a self" (p. 114). The taking in of another self through symbolic exchange, however, is not a passive process, for it involves the effort of individuals to appropriate words by adjusting their own semantic intentions to those of others. Bakhtin (1981) describes the process in the following way:

> The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language . . . but rather it exists in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own. (pp. 293-94)

Yet, by making a word one's own, by participating in symbolic exchange, which is reciprocal in nature, one is conditioned by the intentions of others. These intentions which manifest themselves in language not only create certain structures of belief, but reinforce hierarchies in social relationships as well. For, as Edelman (1977) explains in his discussion of the political language of the helping professions, "language dispels the uncertainty in speculation, changes facts to make them serve status distinctions, and reinforces ideology" (p. 61). Contrast, for example, the way society "helps" elites and nonelites. Loaning money to Chrysler is done in the name of the national interest and the entire corporation is perceived as the beneficiary not specific

executives who may have been responsible for the mismanagement of the company. However, when help is given to the poor, the recipients are brought into sharp focus and often portrayed as deviants and malingerers. Mechanical literacy, then, reinforces a naive view of language which assumes that terms simply represent specific objects or behavior, and as a consequence, to quote Edelman again, "we mask its [language's] profound part in creating social relationships and in evoking roles and the 'selves' of those involved in the relationships" (p. 58).

The third assumption mechanical literacy makes about language is that its primary purpose is to convey information. This view is certainly consistent with the curriculum of the modern university which, at least on the undergraduate level, largely ignores primary texts in favor of textbooks and attempts to present an organized body of knowledge specific to each academic discipline at the expense of helping students begin developing a coherent intellectual overview. Thus, Behrens (1980) argues that composition courses should strongly emphasize the reading and writing of information because "the great majority of material assigned to students in their courses . . . would have to be classified as 'information'" (p. 567). What mechanical literacy tacitly communicates to students and, in many cases, has already taught their writing instructors is that there are two ways of responding to the world: one way is based on "hard knowing" or the facts and the other on "soft faith" or emotions (Booth, p. 91). It is not surprising, therefore, that many composition courses on college and university campuses are either taught along the lines of current-traditional rhetoric, which is

intended to serve the research-based model of the modern university, or they are informed by the expressive orientation to writing instruction, which encourages students to discover something to say by first consulting and then writing about their personal feelings and experiences. Papers in these courses, as one might imagine, often take on the air of true confessions. And some courses strangely use a combination of both approaches in which writing about personal experience becomes a way of "warming up" students to organizing factual information and describing their observations.

Critical literacy, in contrast, assumes that language can bridge the gap between facts and values by creating new knowledge through good reasons. Critical literacy, in other words, makes possible and encourages a rhetoric of good reasons, for new knowledge is a function of both identification (agreement) and division (disagreement), to use the terms of Burke (1969, pp. 3-46). That is, a rhetoric of good reasons not only defines a discourse community by creating a context for agreement, calling attention to shared concerns and reinforcing commonly held values by drawing inferences from these shared values (identification), but it also creates and refashions a discourse community by the kinds of answers or good reasons it formulates in response to conflict (division). In short, good reasons connect what people believe to specific stances they take when they disagree and such a connection has the potential to change for both writer and reader their view of the world. Facts, then, never exist in a value-free environment. They must be understood both in their relevant social,

historical, ideological, or philosophical contexts, and in the particular context of the writer or speaker's argument.

The fourth and final assumption mechanical literacy makes about language is that improvement in language use is directly related to remediation of skills at and beyond the sentence level. That is, if students are having problems with coherence, they ought to learn about transitions, topic sentences, and methods of paragraph development; if they are having difficulty organizing their papers, they should be told about the various models of organization and ways to begin and conclude a paper; if they are having difficulty thinking of something to say, they should practice free writing, brainstorming, or outlining; and, of course, if they are making mistakes in usage, they should learn the rules of grammar. However, what I want to insist on is that literacy is not a function of learning the rules of grammar, practicing the techniques of prewriting, or being able to imitate patterns which organize discourse. Rather, literacy is a function of engaging ideas and making meaning. According to Robinson (1985), literacy develops

> through the use of language to make meanings that count for something in contexts where learning and sharing what is learned counts for something. Literacy is an outcome, not a skill, and not (even) a competency. It is something that is achieved when competencies are enabled through exercise of the human capacity to make meaning. (p. 485)

To illustrate the point, I refer to Hartwell (1985) who makes it very clear that learning the rules of what he labels "school grammar" and

"stylistic grammar" has little connection to improving linguistic performance. He supports his case in part by referring to Stephen Krashen's use of concentric circles to demonstrate the constraining force of formal rules in the acquisition of a foreign language. Whether or not formal rules constrain linguistic performance in the composition classroom is a debatable issue; however, what Krashen's model does demonstrate without equivocation is that learning the formal rules of grammar is irrelevant to writing ability. Here's how the model works: the first circle encompasses all the rules of English, the second and smaller circle the rules described by formal linguists, the third and smaller circle the rules known to applied linguistics, the fourth and smaller circle the rules known to the best teachers, the fifth and smaller circle the rules taught, and the smallest circle (which ought to be about the size of a pin head) represents the rules of grammar students know. In other words, if correct verbal expression depended on learning the rules of grammar, most people would never utter, in the course of their entire life, a complete, grammatically correct sentence. Improvement in linguistic performance, Hartwell argues, is rather a natural consequence of learning to manipulate language in meaningful contexts because such activity has the capacity to change the deep structure of one's internal grammar. Moffett (1968) makes the same point when he says that "the final answer to linguistic elaboration lies beyond language, in general cognitive development, and that intellectual stimulation is far more likely to accelerate syntactic growth than grammar knowledge" (p. 163).

In addition to possessing linguistic competence--the unconscious knowledge which allows native speakers to get words in the right order, change tenses, and make nouns plural--most students come to college also knowing most of the cookbook recipes for writing a paper. For three years running on the first day of each semester, I asked freshmen composition students to tell me how they wrote a paper and what I got from each class touched on, in one way or another, much of the advice offered in current composition textbooks. For example, about getting started, one student wrote: "Pre-writing is the first step. This step includes defining the task, audience and purpose of the paper. Next in line is brainstorming which is the process for coming up with ideas for your paper." Another wrote the following about paragraphs: "Properly constructing the opening paragraph is very important because you want to be sure you get the reader's attention, and then throughout the paper keep him interested. Devising a good topic sentence is the most important part of writing a paragraph. This sentence will link the ideas in the rest of the paper together." And about revising and proofreading, a third student wrote: "My next step would be to rewrite the rough draft and finish up with a good copy, which I proofread one last time. I think it is very beneficial if another person reads your good copy before it is handed in just to point out any noticeable mistakes." Yet knowing the cookbook recipes from composition texts, like knowing the rules of grammar, does not in and of itself improve writing.

Thus, writing instruction which assumes that learning to use language effectively is a matter of mastering mechanical skills is

oppressive. It is not only in the narrow sense, because, in many (perhaps most) cases as my experience has confirmed, students are being required to repeat what they've already done, but it is oppressive in a larger sense. By placing a disproportionate emphasis on form and correctness, such instruction sacrifices development of critical thinking and sequential thought, restricts interpretation of ideas, and most important, it does not expose students to the dialectical process which forces them to give good reasons for their positions on important questions. Learning to give good reasons on issues that matter is a necessary cause not only for writing improvement, but also for the development of critical perspectives and ultimately a coherent intellectual overview.

If students, therefore, are going to be liberated from the problems of "bad" grammar, from having very little or nothing to say, and from expressing themselves incoherently, then, ideas rather than form, feeling, or process must be at the center of the composition classroom. That is, because ideas provide a purpose for reading, discussing, and writing, they help define each class as a discourse community. It is in this context that form (from the figures of speech to the rhetorical modes) is used in the service of supporting a point of view, that feeling is aroused as a natural result of considering ideas that have consequence, and that process is important only to the extent that it helps writers discover what they need to say.

These are the specific conditions of such a class. First, students must read essays which present and develop contrasting ideas on serious

topics such as education, feminism, technology, censorship, civil disobedience, the good life and so on, rather than reading essays which are selected because they illustrate various rhetorical patterns.[1] Second, students must be held accountable for a close reading of each essay. This means doing at least three things for each assigned reading: (1) taking notes on and responding to the writer's developing argument as the essay is being read, (2) reconstructing the controlling deductive argument of the essay which includes noting the writer's thesis and the principal deductive reason supporting the thesis, and (3) evaluating the position of and addressing the issues raised by the essay in an extended critical comment of one to two paragraphs. And finally, class time should involve three activities: (1) clarification of the writer's argument in the assigned reading if that is necessary and, more important, discussion and evaluation of the writer's position, for it is from the discussion that students begin to learn what they want to say in response to a particular question at issue which will be the point of departure for their writing; (2) presentation and discussion of student arguments during which time students write thesis statements along with the principal supporting deductive reason on the board (a thesis statement or assertion plus the principal supporting reason or because clause is called an enthymeme[2]); and (3) selected papers after being evaluated by the instructor are read to the class either by the instructor or by the author of the essay for the purpose of sharing the quality of that writer's thought with others.

I teach at a college where the average verbal aptitude test score

for entering freshmen is below the national average, yet students respond well and sometimes even enthusiastically to this method of instruction. As a rule, they come to class prepared to discuss the issues raised by the assigned reading, discussions are usually lively, and the quality of their thinking improves, noticeably in some cases, over the course of a semester.

Composition instructors, then, can use language to contribute to the intellectual liberation of their students by requiring students to read essays which deal at some length with significant ideas and by encouraging them to make connections between those ideas through discussion, writing, and further reading. Under such circumstances the faculty of rhetoric will be properly exercised: first, because disagreement engendered by discussion of the issues raised by each essay will provide a motive for discourse, for some students will want the question at issue resolved one way rather than another, and second, because, in the effort to support their opinions with good reasons, students will begin to discover and test what they believe, and thus become involved in the life-long task of putting together a set of ideas which may help them make sense of the world.

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Moffett, J. (1968). Teaching the universe of discourse. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

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Winkler, A. C., & McCuen, J. R. (1981). Rhetoric made plain (3rd ed.) New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Footnotes

[1]Three readers containing essays that present contrasting points of view on serious topics include:

Booth, W. C., & Gregory, M. W. (Eds.). (1984). The Harper & Row reader. New York: Harper and Row.

Hunt, D. (Ed.). (1986). The dolphin reader. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Muscatine, C., & Griffith, M. (Eds.). (1984). The Borzoi college reader (5th ed.). New York: Knopf.

[2]For applications of the enthymeme to teaching composition, see the following works:

Brandt, W. J., Beloof, R., Nathan, L., & Selph, C. E. (1969). The craft of writing. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.

Gage, J. T. (1983). Teaching the enthymeme: Invention and arrangement. Rhetoric Review, 2, 38-50.

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